



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Heaven is not built of country seats,
But little queer suburban streets.*

Christopher Morley

The glimpses come when least expect them. When I'm not studying, not praying, not trying to develop the discernment of a Father Brinckerhoff -- not thinking about heaven at all. Just, all at once, there I am...



The Stoplight

I was driving from our house to the village of Mt. Kisco one afternoon, as I do a dozen times a week, with the usual list of errands --a package to be weighed at the post office, dry cleaning to drop off. I was stopped by the traffic light at the edge of town. I was sitting at the wheel, watching the cars turn onto Route 133 from Maple Avenue, waiting for the light to turn and wondering how long the line at the post office would be, when suddenly... I was filled with a nearly unbearable love for the people in every car I saw.

It actually ached, the yearning for each of them was so strong. How gracious that driver signaling his turn! How patient the woman in the car behind him! How infinitely valuable every driver, every passenger...

The light changed and the moment passed. How long did it last -thirty seconds? It was as if for the blinking of an eye the curtain that shielded me from reality had lifted, and I'd felt a fraction of what God felt as he brooded over that intersection.

If the curtain had not dropped again at once, I think the intensity of feeling would have torn me apart. Nor could I sustain that love for other drivers; soon the roads filled again with tailgaters behind me and dawdlers in front. But for one indelible moment, an utterly ordinary scene had been, in a sense, unmasked: At the juncture of Route 133 and Maple Avenue was the gate of heaven.

The Burning Bush

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God.
And only he who sees takes off his shoes.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

If the portals of heaven can swing open on a suburban street, they can open anywhere. Its new eyes, not new settings, that make the difference.

Take off your shoes! God cautions Moses as he approaches the burning bush. *The place where you are standing is holy ground.*

And where is this sanctified spot? Not in some splendid palace of Moses' youth. Not in one of the awesome Egyptian temples he knew so well. The holy ground is an ordinary patch of desert where Moses, as he does every day, is herding sheep. Just another rugged stretch of the wilderness where he's fled, like Jacob, to escape trouble back home. But because Moses stops and looks, he detects the presence of God.

What if our new-opened eyes saw in every bush the radiant world that permeates our own! What if, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, its only our inattention that misses it?

And he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight" (Exodus 3:2-3 RSV). It's the turning aside that makes the difference. Moses stops, he looks, he interrupts his daily activities. And only then does God reveal the sacredness of these seemingly commonplace surroundings. *When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush ... "put off your shoes" (Exodus 3:4-5 RSV).*

What if I could learn to see this whole earth as holy ground? What if wherever I looked I saw a ladder at my feet?

Molly

I've known people who do. Father Brinckerhoff was one. My friend Molly Shelley was another. Most of her life, Molly admitted, she hadn't been good at seeing even in the ordinary way. "Would you believe," she told me, "that I never used to see trees? Really see them?"

Till the age of forty-two, Molly had been caught in that same perfection trap that lures me too into focusing on my performance instead of God's. She was busy trying to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother to her six children, the perfect Christian, always at church or Bible study, taking on every volunteer job in the parish.

Then in 1981 Molly was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Activities curtailed, she became aware of a voice that, she suspected, had been calling to her for years. *Come out in the yard with me*, she heard God say. Outside, trees were in their summer green. Green?

"Why, green wasn't a single color! I counted eleven separate shades that till that moment I'd simply called 'green.'"

And if the physical world was glorious, the spiritual one was more so! It was a visitor to her hospital room, an elderly man she scarcely knew, who introduced Molly to a world even closer than her own backyard. The old man stood at the foot of her bed and wept. She couldn't ask him what the trouble was because of the tube down her throat, so she asked God. And God said,

He's crying because he loves you.

"But I've never done anything for him!"

He loves you because you are lovable.

Lovable? Just ... by being? Just ... lying in a hospital bed accomplishing nothing? For Molly that old mans tear-streaked face was her burning bush. "All my life I'd tried so hard to earn love -- starting with God's. I was taught as a child that if you were good enough, you'd go to heaven when you died. Now I know its not a question of how good I am, but how much God loves me. Why, I'm in heaven right now!"

Molly knew she was dying, and she knew she didn't have to wait till then to enter Paradise.

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